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Temporal flexibility in the digital university: full-time, part-time, flexitime

Abstract

In this paper I engage with the persistent theme of flexibility in higher and online distance education. I argue that, while a discourse of flexibility promises opportunities for access to online education, it also has the potential to devalue it by paying too little attention to education's time-consuming practices, often perpetuating a notion of teaching and learning which is depicted as a-temporal and free from the constraints of time. The paper draws on interviews with university staff and students undertaken during a three-year case study of a distance education expansion project in a UK university. A temporal analysis is outlined which highlights institutional adjustments towards flexibility and draws attention to interview accounts which implicitly accept work and study practices which, in other contexts, might be described as shift-working and overtime, indicative of a culture of combined work and study which is *beyond* full-time. I propose that the erosion of the notion of full-time is in evidence, in which part-time study is aligned with affordability and made unproblematic by the notion of flexible access to education. Further research on time and temporality in online distance education and the higher education context is recommended.

Keywords: digital education, higher education, flexibility, part-time, temporality

Word count: 8,558, excluding abstract and including references

Introduction

This paper focuses on the theme of temporal flexibility in online distance education. It is underpinned by a three-year case study of a strategic initiative to expand online distance education at a campus-based UK university, anonymised here as the *University of CityName*.

In terms of the recent distance education literature, this is a strategic move to becoming a ‘dual mode’ institution (see Mays *et al* 2018, special edition of *Distance Education*), focused initially on developing a suite of postgraduate courses to be made available fully online to distance students.

I begin with an overview of the theme of flexibility in the higher education research literature, concluding with influential work from the Higher Education Academy (2014) which suggests that flexible approaches in the sector aim towards the desired production of ‘flexible graduates’. I then move on to describe the research context, methodology and methods engaged in the research study underpinning this paper, including details of the temporal analysis undertaken. I go on to explore the temporal adjustments surfaced in interviews with staff at the *University of CityName*, during its period of digital expansion in online distance education for postgraduate students. Here I consider institutional adjustments and changes which begin to trouble established temporal expectations, such as when students might be undertaking particular activities in relation to their studies, and the established timeframes of the University and its academic calendar as temporal shifts occur. I then draw on interviews with distance students from the same institution to show that among this group there appears to be little room for temporal flexibility when all hours of the day and night have been accounted for. Finally, I conclude by proposing that, as the notion of full-time and the cohesion of the temporal student ‘cohort’ may be being eroded without substantive critique, there is a lack of attention, both in the literature and in the accounts I have drawn on from the field, being given to what might be thought of as *quality time* in education.

In the name of flexibility

In recent editorials for *Distance Education*, Naidu (2017a, 2017b) gives an overview of some of the opportunities, challenges and complexities of approaches to flexibility in the higher education sector, recognising the multiple ways in which options for developing flexible learning and teaching practices have continued to increase. Highlighting influencing factors on the character and extent of flexibility realised in a given course or programme, from disciplinary and subject requirements, to access to technologies and technological infrastructures, he asks, ‘How flexible is flexible learning?’ and ‘Who decides?’ (Naidu 2017b). This paper offers a particular case study response, by considering such questions in relation to temporal flexibility, beginning by looking at some of the influences on the discourse of flexibility from both outside and within the sector.

In his influential work on ‘flexible capitalism’, Sennett (1998) refers to systems in which forms of rigidity and routine in the workplace are under threat, where “Workers are asked to behave nimbly, to be open to change on short notice, to take risks continually, to become ever less dependent on regulations and formal procedures” (p.9). Building on this analysis, in more recent work on flexible temporality and its effects on workers and the workplace, Snyder (2016) identifies flexible capitalism as:

a product of economic elites (business owners, policymakers, management experts, economists, etc.) who have restructured production and employment practices based on certain preferences, such as improvisation over planning, fluidity over fixity, and abstraction over concreteness (p.5).

Snyder (2016) goes on to emphasise the role of digital technologies in these shifting practices and processes, technologies which, he emphasises,

have made work more abstract, quantifiable, fluid, and portable. This has made work more flexible in the sense that the actual objects and process of work...are less beholden to a physical time-space. (Snyder p.7).

In the context of higher education, Nicoll (2011) emphasises the need, “to understand the significance of flexible learning is...to explore changes that are wrought through it, in the name of flexibility” (p.313). For Nicoll, this means considering changes in institutions in relation to economic and social change, in order to ask clear questions about the desirability of such reconfigurations (p.313).

Nicoll (2011) expands on flexibility’s relationship with ‘e-learning’, observing the reconfiguration of the university:

As practices shift towards more flexible forms of learning and e-learning, the ‘architecture’ of the university as an organized learning environment is reconfigured...this architecture changes and overlaps with those in workplaces and e-sites and other places...it is understandable, therefore, to talk about the student as potentially ‘freer,’ as having more autonomy in flexible and e-learning. However, when you look closely, the architecture for normalization does not disappear. The student is made ‘open’ to disciplining effects from elsewhere, and in potentially less predictable ways. (p.317)

Here Nicoll (2011) identifies a reconfiguration (in the terms of this paper, a recalibration) in the ordering and organization of the university, in this case examined spatially rather than temporally, to consider its extension beyond the campus. In doing so, she highlights a tension in the discourse between the ‘freedom’ of flexibility and alternative forms of normalization. This continues to be important point to make amidst the implied freedom of the ubiquitous promise of ‘anytime, anywhere’ in online education, influenced by the increasing availability and marketing discourse of mobile technologies. The FutureLearn (2017) course website, for example, encourages potential massive open online course (MOOC) students to “learn anytime, anywhere... wherever you are and whenever you want”, disconnecting the practices of learning and teaching from context and, I suggest, from the commitment of time required for study.

Edwards (1997), in an earlier exploration of flexibility in adult education, draws on the temporal aspects of flexibility to consider the practice of modularisation which he sees as aligned with opportunities for intermittent and ‘convenient’ education; an adoption of practices which also do work to, “normalise a view of adults as not having the time to commit themselves to long periods of study” (p.121). For Edwards (1997), there is a sense of education as something which must be adjustable, to fit around other temporal priorities, going on to link modularisation to funding, in its association with a pay-as-you-go approach to education, based on affordability (p.121). The form of normalisation observed by Edwards (1997) continues in more recent and current discourse, from education policy, through a shift in temporal practices, to students who appear to expect that it is their responsibility to ‘find time’ to commit to a course of study, which becomes, in Raddon’s (2007) research, for example, a case of how to fit study into busy and complex lives. There is of course a balance to be struck here. There are undeniably new opportunities for access to education in a

technologically mobile context, particularly when some courses are offered for free to those who have access to supporting technologies. However, who pays for education, who has access demographically, and who makes the temporal commitments to support education remain problematic issues to be addressed.

For Selwyn (2011),

The notions of ‘flexibility’ and ‘adaptability’ now lie at the heart of post-compulsory education...it is now received wisdom that education needs to be provided by institutions in ways that best ‘fit’ with the lives of individual learners. (p.367)

Here Selwyn points particularly to a lack of research into how “principles and expectations of flexibility are being encountered and ‘worked out’ within the day-to-day lives of individual learners” (p.368). He goes on to draw on research into the experiences of international students, studying in different countries from their “host” institution (p.369). Alongside the perceived flexible advantages of distance education, Selwyn also identifies a temporal thread in some interviews where, “a strong sense emerged...of distance learning being compromised by the routine demands and commitments of an individual’s day...in particular, the inflexible time demands of family commitments” (Selwyn 2011 375).

Gillies (2011) goes further in proposing that ‘flexibility’ gives way to ‘agility’ in policy discourse (p.207), finding its way into higher education policy. While agility is not an explicit theme with which I work in the research underpinning this paper, its strong association with software development means that it is not an unfamiliar metaphor in digital education. Modularisation in general, and MOOC short course provider straplines such as “We want to help students learn better - and faster” (Coursera 2016), for example, fit well

with the agile trend. In an example of agility discourse in higher education, Mukerjee (2014), focusing on universities in Australia, finds that agility is identified as an essential response to disruption (abstract). In the US, the New Media Consortium's 2016 annual higher education report includes the statement that, "There is a growing consensus among many higher education thought leaders that institutional leadership and curricula could benefit from adopting agile startup models" (p.8). In temporal terms, 'agility' introduces speed to the notion of flexibility in the higher education discourse.

Gillies's (2011) focus on 'agile bodies', draws directly on Martin's significant 1994 work on 'flexible bodies', in which she cautions against wholesale acceptance of the flexible ideal, seeing the potential for what she terms a 'neo-Darwinism':

it is no wonder that moving gracefully as an agile, dancing, flexible worker/person/body feels like a liberation, even if one is moving across a tightrope. But can we simultaneously realize that the new flexible bodies are also highly constrained? They cannot stop moving... We need to examine carefully the social consequences of these constraints. (Martin 1994, pp.247-8)

Martin continues by highlighting the risk of an internalised flexibility, as a consequence of living in a cultural context in which flexibility is highly valued, leading to an emphasis on, and acceptance of, continued compliance and adaptation rather than, "calling attention to the order of things" (p.249). I present this as a cause for continued concern in relation to temporal flexibility in higher education today.

As Barnett asks in the 2014 Higher Education Academy (HEA) report, *Conditions of Flexibility: Securing a more responsive higher education system*, “Who could not be in favour of ‘flexibility’? It is an hurrah concept” (p.32). With the rhetorical power of flexibility in mind, Barnett reminds readers that the flexible metaphor should be approached with caution, as a broad term often used to respond to, “many if not all of the alleged shortcomings in and challenges facing higher education” (p.32). While taking a critical stance, however, Barnett’s (2014) report is a concluding one, which draws from a set of HEA reports on flexibility by other authors, which continue to do work to support flexibility as a response in the higher education discourse. The concluding report is prefaced with a foreword by Levy (2014) which includes the assertion that,

it is very appropriate that a major report such as this...should principally highlight the intended outcome of flexible pedagogies: *flexible graduates*. Graduates who are able to engage with the uncertainties, complexities and demands of a rapidly changing world - some might even say a ‘flexi world’ - actively and constructively, from a position of what Professor Barnett identifies as epistemic flexibility. (Levy in Barnett 2014, p.4, my emphasis)

This idea of the ‘flexible graduate’ in the HEA report sees flexibility embodied as the positive outcome (or product) of a flexible approach to pedagogy (pointing to a reciprocal flexibility in the teacher), the assumption being that flexibility rather than stability is the most effective and desirable response to “rapid change” (p.23). As Martin (1994) observes, the flexible metaphor can be traced from discourse, to organizations, to material products, to bodies. I will return to this notion of embodied flexibility in the light of student accounts later in this paper.

In 2018, as a response to a dramatic reduction in the number of part-time undergraduate students in England (Callendar and Thompson 2018), the focus of a current Universities UK (UUK) investigation, in conjunction with the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), is on ‘the economic case’ for flexibility. While the drop in the number of part-time students is attributed to the 2012 increase in higher education fees in England (UUK 2018), the investigation focuses on the views of employers rather than prospective students and ability to pay. Flexible approaches to study are again being positioned as a potential response to perceived ‘changing needs’ in education (UUK 2018).

Temporal recalibration - a definition

In this paper I refer to Sharma’s (2011) notion of “temporal recalibration”. Drawing on Foucault’s (1979) concept of biopower, as a form of state power in which bodies are controlled to achieve particular effects in the wider population, Sharma (2011) draws attention to a contemporary context in which, “everywhere bodies are differently trying to keep up. *Recalibration* is the temporal component of biopower” (p.442, emphasis added). In this sense of recalibration, bodies adjust, or are adjusted, temporally, to the more dominant temporal order. In later work (2013, 2014), Sharma develops her theory of critical time and defines her use of ‘temporal’ as a term which, “does not imply a transcendent sense of time or the time of history”, but which represents “*lived* time...structured in specific political and economic contexts” (p.9). It is this sense of lived, entangled, structured and structuring time that is referred to in discussions of temporality in this paper.

Research context and methodology

This paper draws on a three-year narrative ethnographic research project which looked at the expansion of online distance education for postgraduate taught students in the UK, focusing

on a case study of a particular university initiative, considered in the context of wider changes in the higher education sector. The research took place during a period of strategic digital expansion at the *University of CityName*, where funding had been allocated by the institution to support the development and delivery of new postgraduate courses and programmes which were designed to be available to distance students on a fully online basis. The research focused on how a strategic shift to increase the provision of online distance education in a traditional, research-intensive, campus-focused university might affect the temporal and spatial practices of the institution. Taking a narrative ethnographic approach (Gubrium and Holstein 2008), 29 in-depth narrative interviews (Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000) were undertaken over a period of two years, with staff and students directly engaged in the expansion of distance education at the *University of CityName*. Time was also spent on campus attending open meetings and network events for those involved in developing online education.

Interviewees were either involved in project management of the digital expansion, senior academic management, administration, the academic or technical development of new courses, or were engaged as students enrolled in the new online courses and programmes. The 29 interviews involved twenty-five research participants overall, four of whom were interviewed for a second time to follow up on course developments after a period of several months. Seven interviews in total were undertaken with postgraduate students, with three of those based in the UK, and the others in Bangladesh, Nigeria, Rwanda and Singapore. Each research participant can be viewed as belonging to one of three broad groups:

A: a senior University management group (6), consisting of five senior managers and one project administrator.

B: a course development group (12), consisting of those leading or co-leading one of eight new courses or programmes which had received early funding from the expansion project. In

this group I included two staff leading Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), an initiative discussed by two of the senior managers as closely related strategically to the digital expansion project. One learning technologist was also interviewed who had been newly recruited to support one of the new programmes.

C: a student group (7), consisting of taught postgraduate students, where each student was enrolled on one of three online courses selected to be explored in more depth. Volunteer student participants were sought by course teams via course email lists and online discussion fora.

[Table 1 near here, appended]

University staff were interviewed on campus, in person, and distance students were interviewed by telephone, Skype, or Blackboard Collaborate (web conferencing software), depending on which method of online communication they were most familiar and comfortable with in their new course of study.

Interview transcripts were coded thematically in NVivo, paying particular attention to temporal and spatial references, building on what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to as a ‘three dimensional narrative inquiry space’ for narrative research (p.50). Key terms in this narrative framework were used as coding categories:

personal and *social* (interaction); *past*, *present*, and, *future* (continuity); combined with the notion of *place* (situation). This set of terms creates a metaphorical *three dimensional narrative inquiry space*, with temporality along one dimension, the personal and the social along a second dimension, and place along a third. (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, p.50, italics in original)

A further key analytic task was undertaken based on Adam's (2004) work on the 'timescape'. Adam acknowledges the difficulties of working with a temporal analysis which might be seen as being in tension with creating 'pockets of order, invariance and stability' (p.144). I drew on Adam's (2004) timescape framework of, 'grouping practices around a number of time Ts' (p.144), using her definitions of the following: 'time frames', 'temporality', 'tempo', 'timing', 'time point', 'time patterns', 'time sequences' and 'time extensions'. The timescape framework allowed for an analysis which surfaced a more nuanced range of temporal processes than those initially addressed via the narrative inquiry space.

Codes were drawn then, both thematically from topics arising in the narrative interviews, and from narrative and temporal conceptual frameworks. The grouping of interviews meant that I was able to make comparisons across interview sets to support accounts of the institutional project and highlight any inconsistencies. However, it was not my intention to make broad generalisations in this analysis, but rather to look for rich accounts of change in individual and institutional practices and processes. This approach to the interview material enabled me to surface and work with a number of times and spaces which were significant to the experiences of participants. In this analysis flexible time and flexible working were recurrent themes which are explored in-depth in this paper.

Organizing flexible time: a discussion of findings

In the second half of this paper, I draw on the themes outlined above, to take a critical approach to flexibility, by looking closely at flexible practices. Interview material relating to this theme is presented and discussed below, firstly, to consider temporal flexibility in the University in relation to the academic calendar, and an increase in the number of part-time students at *CityName*; secondly, to consider the thoughts of academic staff developing new

online courses, on temporal negotiations in relation to the experience of students, and finally to look at temporal recalibration in the accounts of online distance students themselves.

Institutional flexibility: a strategic perspective

Michael, the most senior academic leader I interview, identifies a number of key drivers for the expansion of online distance education at *CityName*. At the institutional level, he clearly identifies opportunities to diversify income streams and to reach a wide, internationally diverse audience. As an academic, with significant professional experience in the development of distance and online education, which is common among the project leadership team I speak to, he also takes the view, based on positive experiences across a number of institutions, that for some courses, technology can support ‘a better learning experience’. Here Michael identifies a flexible strategic approach to income and geographic reach, but also to pedagogy and technology. This is underlined by Alan, another senior academic leader at *CityName* who describes the expansion process as extending the educational opportunity of taking a qualification at *CityName* to those who can’t currently undertake a course for ‘reasons of time and space’.

In my second interview with Alan, another senior academic manager at *CityName*, I made the observation that, in the context of online distance expansion at *CityName*, a significant aspect of developing and expanding online courses seemed to be about understanding and working with an increasing number of part-time students, a previously very small group in *CityName*’s student population. In agreement with this observation, Alan identified many associated changes, “organizational changes, a lot of governance and procedure and rules and regulations changes, and also a lot of cultural changes” (Alan). For part-time and Masters

degrees, Alan compared the open university model (in the UK and elsewhere), as a well-established part-time student model, with “traditional” universities having little or no provision for part-time or distance students. Alan observes that, aside from the Open University model in the UK, “there was a point in time at which you either went to a university [campus] or you didn’t study’ (Alan). He notes that for “newer universities”,

their rules about how you make a degree are much less tied to the continuous presence on campus...it’s a bigger shock for us [at *CityName*], because we’ve just stayed so long stuck in this full-time mode. (Alan)

Like other senior staff I speak to, Alan refers to existing institutional and individual practices and process which can cope with ‘exceptions’ to the on-campus, full-time rule, but only in small numbers. Alan identifies the problem of University systems that will not cope with exceptions in large numbers or “at scale”, making it necessary to recalibrate systems to work well with the numbers of online courses and thousands of new online distance part-time students to which *CityName* aspires in its online expansion. The full-time model and the part-time intermittent model must both be accommodated by the systems which ‘process’ students from matriculation, through various aspects of programme progression and course completion, to qualification and graduation.

Alan went on to talk through the implications for the academic year in relation to online modules. The academic year at *CityName*, as at other, but not all, UK universities, is structured around two semesters per year, with a short break from teaching in December and a longer teaching break during the summer. Courses at *CityName*, according to the standard linear model, with a small number of exceptions, enrol new students in September but, during

the period of my research, a number of online courses had also begun to enrol students in January. Alan emphasised that there was no strict requirement to “follow the academic year”, suggesting that course organizers might consider running courses three times in the year, with the equivalent of a third ‘semester’ in the summer. While emphasizing that the new online courses involved a relatively small number of staff at the time of our conversation, making it difficult to make general statements, Alan works on the assumption that most courses would be working within the pattern of the traditional academic year, with recruitment taking place in the spring for courses starting in September. Thinking beyond the new postgraduate programmes to continued professional development (CPD) he observes that short courses could, in theory, be run several times a year.

I don’t think that the people who are offering CPD have necessarily thought yet enough about *how they are going to do their time*, they could follow a different model, it doesn’t really matter. (Alan, my emphasis)

Alan goes on to describe the effect that this shift in the course commencement month, and/or the potential for two intakes of students per year has on student support services.

there are implications for the support services, because not only can you not make an assumption that somebody can pop in next Thursday [to a physical campus location], but you also can’t make an assumption about *where they are in their timing*, so if they email you in November, you can’t assume that they’ve been there for two months...the timing, all of that, kind of gets thrown...they [students] are actually part-time intermittent technically, so they could decide not to take a module or they could decide to take two, so *they could flex it*...of course, *there’s a real timing question* around thinking about how you identify these students and understand that a) they’re at a distance and

b) that they aren't doing this in a full-time mode, and they aren't even necessarily doing it in a lock-step mode, and there's much more variety there than one finds in our Masters programmes at the moment. (Alan, my emphases)

Alan goes on to explain the “lock-stepped” model for some programmes which are organised in a linear fashion, where “you do this, then you do that”, but recognising that others may be more “cafeteria-like”, with modules running more than once a year. Alan identifies not only an increasingly complex academic year, in terms of entry points for students and repetition in terms of modules, but also complexity in the individual student path, reducing the number of assumptions that support service staff can make about the temporal and spatial aspects of the student experience. Alan talks about the traditional campus experience as a spatially and temporally bound one which excludes the professional, temporally and spatially bound worker.

you're trying to reach working professionals, and so offering them on-campus degrees wasn't really a solution from their point of view...so, it's only when you can break free of the campus that suddenly you've actually got a way of making this thing work. (Alan)

In turn, this also requires a review of how students pay fees for their courses; “you're paying as you go, because your pace is not lock-stepped by the full-timeness of it” (Alan).

A number of issues raised by Edwards (1997), discussed earlier in this paper, arise in Alan's account, particularly here positive associations of flexibility and modularisation, together with a pay-as-you-go financial model. Alan's account highlights the notion of time-shifting in, or a recalibration of, the academic year. While there is no notion of a ‘third semester’ elsewhere in my research interviews, it clearly comes into Alan's account as a potential shift

in the academic calendar. What is clear is a perceived necessity to adapt the model of educational delivery to the time of the professional market, a temporal recalibration to a market model. Here student time is highly individualised, and there is a sense in which time is a flexible, almost unlimited, resource on the part of the institution, rather than something which is shared between students and staff and bound in multiple ways. Moreover, flexibility appears to demand that time can be ‘done’ in multiple ways. Strategic time is presented here as being almost detached from the time of education, in that it becomes a flexible and manageable resource. Alan’s interview highlights the temporal complexity of an institution adjusting to a ‘dual mode’ of support for staff and students.

Organizing time: academic perspectives

My discussions with academic staff responsible for new online courses surfaced the tension between providing flexible options for a path of study through a programme and ensuring that a student has time to complete their academic work and stay ‘on course’. This was particularly emphasised in my conversations with Iain, an experienced online tutor and programme director, involved in the expansion project in order to develop additional online courses in his subject area. Iain emphasises the importance of offering flexible access to online programmes, following this through to the detail of the course design where, in his subject area, almost all course communications between students are structured asynchronously.

a lot of people are coming to us mid-career, they’ve been out of university for a while, [they] don’t operate in the university kind of calendar, so the more flexibility the better, and that’s true across the board, whether it be when they can start; the number of modules that they can take; the time period that they can take them over; the times when they can post on the discussion boards,

it's asynchronous, all of these things, all of that flexibility is really appreciated by our student body. (Iain)

Iain tells me in some detail about the range of options within the online programmes he is responsible for, including varying the timescale for completion of a qualification, but also varying the student workload over a longer period of time. He stresses the necessity of advising students on understanding short-term pressure, and on taking a longer-term view of their studies.

I would say one of the things I probably find myself repeating most to people is, think about the longer option...I just don't think people have a real sense of, not just how much the commitment is for this degree, but just what it means to take on distance learning as well as everything else that's going on in your life. (Iain)

Mhairi, an academic in the humanities who is developing an online programme for the first time, echoes Iain's view of the tension. Mhairi's Masters programme will be studied part-time by all of its students over a period of three years. For Mhairi, there is a need to support students in organizing their time at the programme level, where flexibility can come into tension with "deadlines" and "timetabling":

people who are working perhaps have less useable time, they want to commit to less specific days and...have a bit of flexibility. Again, the business about flexible learning I suppose is something which comes into the equation and my feeling is that an amount of flexibility is good, but too much is not particularly useful. I think people need deadlines, they need help to organize their time, and my design of the timetabling is geared towards giving people achievable deadlines, but ones which will push them a little bit. (Mhairi)

Jim, developing a new online programme in the sciences, also raises concerns about the relationship between the time taken to study and the additional commitments of postgraduate students. Jim introduces the idea of “solid time”, as a contrast between the block of time indicated in a course description compared with the lived time of multiple responsibilities. Jim talks about the flexibility of exit points on a programme, at certificate and diploma level for example, without leaving individuals or the institution with a feeling of failure. Jim’s view is that students will be attracted by his new Masters programme and by thinking that they will be able to complete it in two years. However, he also thinks that students will encounter “solid time” – “the difference between what people think they can do and what they can actually do”. He goes on to identify the kinds of “life events” which, based on his conversations with more experienced online course leaders, might affect the student group,

The age group who do distance learning...it’s pretty different from undergraduates...they might have at one end children, at the other end ageing parents, at the other end a job, and all these things can put things out of kilter ...we have to have this sort of recovery pathway, without making the University feel that it’s sort of...encouraging failure in their mindset. (Jim)

Finally, Kate, an online programme director teaching in a medical field at *CityName*, poses a key question in thinking about the notion of ‘full-time’ in the context of the project:

How do you create the permission system that allows people to study during work time?’ (Kate)

Kate poses this question in the context of a professional field in which she tells me it has previously been more common to undertake study which is classed as “training”, for one or two days at a time, rather than to undertake a degree level course on an ongoing part-time basis. Kate’s question is in response to my asking whether she knows if her students study

from home or from work. Here lies another tension, between flexible study and the potential inflexibility of the workplace, an issue which seems to arise in both professionally related courses and those which are considered by students to be “non-vocational”. This tension is revisited in the student accounts explored in the next section.

Organizing time: student perspectives

In my interviews with students, even with those for whom studies are directly related to their professional work, there is a clear distinction between work time and study time.

I study at night and on weekends. Since I do not have a laptop, I study at home (is it ethical to use office resources for such intensive personal work?), where I can look up any information I need from the PC. (Chris, Singapore)

sometimes it is difficult to be regular on studies that I maintain during my weekends. Regular, short online discussion with colleagues is not very difficult, but long formal written assignments are challenging. (Jay, Bangladesh)

This [course] was perfect because I didn't have to take any time off [work]. (Robin, UK)

Raddon (2007) observes that for the UK based distance learners she interviews, flexibility is a matter of demonstrating that they are able to manage all of their existing commitments and also participate in “strategic work-related self-development” (p.66). This is a view which was confirmed in my student interviews, both in the UK and internationally.

While students may wish to combine work and study for a variety of reasons, not least in relating theoretical work to professional practice, for many affordability is a factor. The

students I interviewed each studied on one of three courses from which I sought volunteer participants. Three were studying on health and medicine related programmes and four on humanities and social sciences programmes. Even the two students who mentioned scholarship provision for their chosen course were working full-time, in busy jobs with significant responsibilities. Kate's question about creating a "permission system" for study in the workplace seemed significant to these student contexts. This was not just about the value of a course to professional practice, but also raised wider questions about the perceived value of higher education. For those studying courses which were unrelated to their professional working lives, there seemed to be no question that they should be seeking support, whether financial or temporal, from their employers.

I work full-time and am self-funding. The course is non-vocational, so there is no way I could have justified doing it any other way. (Caitlin, UK)

Caitlin is participating in what she describes as a "non-vocational" course in the humanities, and makes it clear to me that full-time work and part-time self-funded study is the only way in which she can contemplate proceeding with her course. The way in which she identifies the course as "non-vocational" and refers to "justifying" her mode of study, point to several aspects of education which are normalised in Caitlin's context. Firstly, a division between "vocational" and "non-vocational" courses, an assessment of whether a programme of study is relevant or not to a workplace or profession. Secondly, the idea that postgraduate study requires "justification", whether to an employer in terms of requesting funding or study leave, or a self-justification in relation to personal expenditure or time commitment.

When I ask Caitlin to tell me more about her study routine, she replies,

I am a morning person, so I get up and do a couple of hours before work, and maybe a bit in the evening depending on when I get home from work. I do all my studying from home. And Sunday afternoons to meet those deadlines.

(Caitlin)

As I am aware that Caitlin works full-time, I am curious to know how early she has to get up in order to study before leaving for work. She replies, “I get up around 4.30-5am”. Given that she has already described herself as a “morning person”, I ask if she would normally get up at this time, and she responds definitively, “Not if I can help it!”. I ask if she commutes to work and she replies, “My commute isn’t too bad - 45 minutes, but I average a 9 hour work day and it can easily be 12 hours in a busy period” (Caitlin). To summarise, on weekdays Caitlin gets up between 4.30 and 5.00am, studies for “a couple of hours”, commutes for 45 minutes, works for between 9 and 12 hours, commutes for another 45 minutes, and studies for a little longer in the evening, depending on what time she gets home. On Sunday afternoons she catches up with any deadlines for that week. When I ask about the challenges of participating in an online distance course however, Caitlin refers to “the length of time since I’ve been out of academic education”, specifically in understanding what might be required in the online context of keeping a “blog”.

My reading of Caitlin’s responses is that time is a commitment she has made to the course, and that it is managed around the, apparently inflexible, routine of her working life. It is not something that she particularly questions, or that she considers to be of any interest to her employer. Caitlin’s long days are expected and, as far as our conversation goes, she does not appear to expect that her overall time commitment could be otherwise. In fact, Caitlin is keen to emphasise that she is able to manage her time effectively. What she does identify as

problematic, however, is a course timetable which does not always fit so well with her working hours.

So in terms of managing my time, I have no difficulty. What I do feel about the course timetabling is that not enough thought has been given to the deadlines - so for instance, forums close at 5pm or midday on a workday, or we have a discussion board that opens at 9am on a Monday. That sometimes means you can't participate in closing a discussion if you are chairing. Also deadlines do feel bunched up...there was no break between the semesters at all. (Caitlin)

While online tutorials are run in the evenings, Caitlin notes that the "admin structure" of the course is more conventional in relation to office hours. The potential temporal flexibility of online is restricted to some extent by the working patterns of the campus. When I ask about synchronous working with other students on the course, Caitlin highlights that,

the challenge my group is having at the moment is that we aren't all in the same time zone...one of my classmates is having to stay up really late. And I can't start much earlier because I don't get home from work. (Caitlin)

Caitlin's stretched day is reflected in the accounts of other students I speak to, all of whom are negotiating study time with work, in addition to any other personal commitments they may have. There are certainly concerns around 'making time', and financial concerns, yet none of the student participants appear to question whether this is the best way to study, or reflect on the impact working and studying may be having on the rest of their lives. Only one student, for example, refers to being tired, despite a clear commitment to significant study hours every week.

For [previous] courses I used to use the evenings and that worked fine. But now the level is higher :) and the demands are greater and I am too tired in the evenings to think straight enough (I work till about 7pm every day). So I do a little in the evenings but most of it at the weekends. (Megan, UK)

I am studying my course from 16h00-21h00 GMT (17h00-23h00, local time) during working days and day time hours of week-ends. [minor discrepancy in times in original] (Theo, Rwanda)

The main challenge I have with the program is the same as that faced by many part-time students around me: carving out time for studies while juggling work commitments. (Chris, Singapore)

Chris is the only student I interview who explicitly raises concerns about the cost of tuition fees, but he is one of only two students outside the UK to whom I speak who does not refer to benefiting from a scholarship (the scholarships students can apply for varies between country locations). In a later email he adds,

I have been thinking about my responses...and realised that I should have put tuition bills as the most challenging issue. It keeps me studying the exchange rate charts and wondering if I am counting down to my days of starvation.

(Chris, Singapore)

All of the students I speak to are somehow finding time to study, but I am aware that they would not be studying at all without working hard to fund their studies and/or being awarded scholarship funding. In turn, scholarship funding can be highly restrictive. The two students I speak to who specifically mention that they are in receipt of funding are not funded by their employers, but have been awarded scholarships by the Commonwealth Scholarship

Commission (CSC). The CSC makes a distinction between the funding provision available for “developed” and “developing” commonwealth countries. At the time of the research project, applications for programmes at Masters level were restricted to applicants from “developing countries”, where priority is given to applications which, “demonstrate the strongest relevance to development” (Commonwealth Scholarship Commission, 2016). It is difficult to imagine how the international students I spoke to would find funding for scholarships in humanities subjects, for example. What is considered to be a legitimate, fundable study subject is not in the control of the student, but is defined by funding organizations with their own particular priorities.

Discussion: quality time

Having referred to Raddon’s (2007) work on student accounts of fitting study into busy lives, and Selwyn’ work on “(in)flexibility” in relation to distance education, and having analysed the temporal aspects of the study situations of ‘distance’ students interviewed in my research, this project highlights continuing efforts involved in, and often the acceptance of, ‘making things work’ in order to access education. At the same time, I found very little in the literature around notions of ‘quality time’ in relation to education, apparently a concept more frequently discussed in relation to working professionals finding time to spend with their families.

One exception to this is in the work of Romero and Barberà (2011), who consider study time for professionals as “the time left over” (p.128), once professional and family commitments have been met, arguing that flexibility does not guarantee “time-on-task quality” (p.126). Here Romero and Barberà (2011) continue to place the responsibility of quality on the learner, in a study which specifically recommends that learners be encouraged to spend more of their quality cognitive time (identified as being at a premium in the morning) on study

activities. There remains a need, however, for further research in the area of quality time in online distance education in which the responsibilities of institutions and employers are also taken into account. Further research should pay attention to the wider net of temporal responsibilities and time factors which come into play in the context of online and part-time courses, in the wider sector and at the institutional level, as well as at the more focused level of the online programme and the study environment. This would also have relevance to full-time students who spend significant hours in paid work to sustain their studies.

One of the effects of the ‘stretch to flexibility’ (Nicoll 2011) may not be a course of lesser quality - I was reminded repeatedly in my research at *CityName* that online programmes were designed to be of equal, if not superior, quality to programmes studied on campus) - but that the time that students are able to commit to study may be of increasingly variable quality. The notion of fitting education around other priorities brings with it the suggestion that such an engagement does not require time which is of high quality, which might mean time which is uninterrupted, or a period of time during which a student feels alert and able to focus. As Edwards suggests (1997), flexibility as a positive principle draws attention away from questions of why learning and teaching practices are required to be flexible, which may be a response to inflexibility elsewhere, in the limited study support provided to employees by employers, for example. At the institutional level, as we have seen, the notions of teaching time and contact time also shift in a digital context. Where traditional lectures, tutorials, laboratory and studio work, linked to particular spaces, may no longer be familiar modes of teaching in online contexts, neither are the familiar measurable timeframes of solid hours. Flexible study requires flexible teaching and the notion of quality time between teachers and students may appear quite differently in an online course. The demands of flexible teaching may have its own effect on other aspects of academic time, and further research on teaching

and research in a ‘dual mode’ institution, with a temporal focus, may also be of interest in future research.

A number of issues are therefore raised for future consideration. In order for part-time students who continue to achieve high grades, it seems important to consider the personal temporal economy, linked to temporal efficiency and to the ability to pay, which might be at play in order to identify ways in which those students might be better supported. One consequence of the stretch to flexibility may be the development and strengthening of a normalised view of the notion of the education shift-worker. Where full-time workers may also study part-time, and full-time students may also work part-time, both temporal terms come into question. There may be a need to acknowledge, in the face of ‘flexible provision’, that the notion of ‘full-time’ is being eroded and that this may have significant consequences not only for quality time in education, but also for the well-being of students if full-time comes to mean a full 24 hour cycle, rather than something that happens 9-5, Monday to Friday, or the equivalent number of shifts over the course of a week.

A key point to emphasise in this paper is that while ‘breaking free’ from the campus in spatial terms might be possible in the development of ‘dual mode’ provision, creating significant opportunities for access to higher education, breaking free from time is not a possibility. Flexible time remains finite and bound, and there is a need to recognize, in Sharma’s terms, that time is uneven (Sharma, 2013). A more considered version of ‘anytime’ in the context of online education becomes ‘when you can’, rather than ‘whenever you want’. To a certain extent, technology allows time to be flattened, made visible and invisible in new ways, with both positive and negative effects. Positive, because online can be experienced as neutral territory, but negative because time itself is not neutral, in that the availability and ‘quality’ of

time varies between participants. For example, those who forfeit sleep to study in the middle of the night are likely to have less ‘quality’ time with which to work than those who have what seems to be becoming the ‘luxury’ of daytime study. Allied with the notion of quality time may also be the idea of ‘sustained time’, rather than the notion of ‘bite-sized’ education which requires the flexibility of all parties. Inflexibility may also be seen as an attribute to be valued in its definition as ‘firmness of purpose’ (OED, 2017). Transposing Martin’s (1994) work on flexible bodies to an educational context, we may need to arrive at a point in education where we can not only recognise the advantages of flexibility, but can also continue to value and support the attributes of “the stable, ample, and still” (p.248).

Conclusion

In this paper I have explored the persistence of the concept of flexibility, examined here in terms of flexible time, as a positive attribute in higher education discourse, not only as an institutional aspiration, but as a desirable quality to be developed in individual, flexible, students. I have traced the problematisation of flexibility in the higher education research literature, noting its persistence in current policy discourse and in the marketing materials of education providers. Flexible time and its positive association with the ubiquitous ‘anytime anywhere’ marketing of technology and education, perhaps more than any other form of time explored in this research project, demands critique. Flexible time, while it might be in many ways desirable in enabling access to education, is also often an ideal which is at odds with temporal experience, where time is finite, bound and shared (Sharma, 2013), and is frequently reported as being scarce and of uneven quality. As Raddon (2004) observes, time and space for education, particularly in the relationship between part-time study and full-time work, is a constant negotiation. Rather than working with the notion that education of the

future will be “better and faster” (Coursera, 2016), such marketing straplines for education need to be challenged by universities, recognising that temporal recalibration in education is also effortful, shifting the established timeframes and temporal choreographies of institutions, teachers and students.

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Table 1. Summary of interview numbers

Group	First Interviews	Second Interviews	Total
A. Senior University management group	6	1	7
B. Academic and other course development staff	12	3	15
C. Postgraduate students	7	0	7
Total	25	4	29